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# Nationalism, History & Policy

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In a recent article for *The Diplomat*, Frank Ching lays out China's view of its South China Sea territorial claims: the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea provides a framework for mediating *new* territorial claims, while any territory that was ever at any point China's is exempt, and so still belongs to it.

"History trumps law," as Ching sums it up.

Ching says that this is a "relatively new" though "not unprecedented" approach by China in international affairs, and it's true that when this pattern began can be disputed. However, there's no disputing that China's invocation of historical justice has become a grinding axe, if not a driving force of its foreign policy.

The mixing of metaphors is no verbal excess here. It raises a question: could it be that China foreign policy establishment truly buys into the nationalist rhetoric it permits to flourish at home?

The Chinese trawler hullabaloo of 2010, when Japan detained the captain of a vessel accused of ramming a Japan Coast Guard ship, is of particular note here. Premier Wen Jiabao demanded the immediate release of the ship's captain and threatened retaliation, despite the trawler being shown on a leaked video to have rammed the Japanese. Why did China resort to threats from its premier

in order to resolve a minor incident in which the burden of evidence weighed firmly against them?

The conventional explanations are as follows: either China used domestic pressure as an excuse for making such a demand, or more worrisome, it actually felt the heat of anti-Japanese protests and acted to appease popular sentiment.

So which is it? Does China instrumentalize nationalism at its convenience in order to pursue foreign policy goals that can't be sanctioned by pragmatic or realist viewpoints? Or does China conduct foreign policy with an eye toward placating nationalists, including avoiding shows of weakness, especially on historically and geo-strategically sensitive matters like Japan, and to a lesser extent, Taiwan?

Some analysts might be skeptical of the power of popular sentiment in Chinese politics. But given the administratively and militarily inept governments from 1840-1949, the Chinese public is more united on the importance of foreign policy strength than it is on other matters. Thus, China can't parry criticisms of foreign policy weakness as swiftly as it can quash democratic activism.

As far as those two viewpoints take us, they're unsatisfactory in a range of cases. Tibet hardly has the same emotional resonance as Japan. Similarly, "liberating" Taiwan has less and less appeal as Chinese learn more about their richer, better-fed, democratic cousins whose culture has outsized influence on China's billion-plus population.

So looking at this from another angle offers a better explanation: the Middle Kingdom's foreign policy elites work with premises not that far from the country's nationalistic extremists. This narrative emphasizes China's victimhood, its vast (circa 1800) wealth plundered by Western bandits landing on its coasts. The British – far from the liberal democrats who outlawed the slave trade and expanded its empire in part due to the naïve, misguided humanism pilloried in *The White Man's Burden* – are uncivilized hucksters who act with no motive but greed. Left out of this narrative is any place for tragedy. No historical event is an accident or misfortune or grand misunderstanding (at least not when it happens to China). History is about right and wrong, the virtuous and venal. And this Manichean outlook has shown no signs of weakening in recent years.

Consider the case of Japan specifically. In his book, *The Perils of Proximity*, Richard Bush explains that China and Japan see history through different lenses. In China's relations with Japan, 1937 is just yesterday, and Japan's peaceful, humanitarian post-war conduct is perhaps an aberration, not to be trusted fully.

Likewise, Japanese leaders' visits to Yasukuni Shrine aren't a morally complex matter of

recognizing the civic virtues of Japanese soldiers who, all parties acknowledge, committed war crimes. Instead, to China's most extreme nationalists, it's simply about honoring the triumphs of imperial Japan and its twisted, ethno-fascist ambitions.

Contrary to the impression many outsiders get from China's moral grandstanding, Japan's prime ministers have repeatedly made apologies for Japanese crimes committed during World War II. As Bush explains, Japan even offered to exceed previous expressions of remorse during Jiang Zemin's 1998 visit to Tokyo. Jiang "refused to accommodate" Japan on this, however. This led many to wonder whether China has any desire to "abandon the leverage afforded by taking the moral high ground."

Did Jiang spurn this offer because of domestic opposition to it, or because it would curtail future chances to instrumentalize nationalist sentiment? I think both answers are no. Instead, nationalistic extremism can be found within Chinese policy making itself.

More recently, the eurozone crisis has provided an opportunity for moralizing that didn't go unsavored by China. Even as the country contemplated trying to help, central bank adviser Li Daokui told potential bailout recipients, "you are the rich, you borrow money from the poor. It's not right for you to continue to lead a luxurious life."

Of course, many Chinese are aware of nationalism's ugliest side effects. Despite the censorship they're forced to contend with, Chinese are capable of critiquing policy. However, these independent-minded Chinese are far from the foreign policy establishment and don't typically reflect the mainstream view of the wider Chinese population. They often also don't have a direct stake in China's foreign policy. Those that do, meanwhile, are simply getting too rich to dwell on abstract questions over the rights and wrongs of nationalism and patriotism. The beneficiaries of China's current foreign policy path include China's military-industrial complex, state-owned enterprises, its revolving door-system of government, business, and lobbyists.

From territorial disputes to intellectual property theft to the undervalued *renminbi*, the prevalence of the notion that China, as great power, is simply taking back what it rightly deserves can't be overlooked. It is, essentially, a policy of two wrongs make a right writ large. And if in the process China takes a little more than it "deserves," then don't expect its nationalists to complain.

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